

**Senate Select Committee on Prison Safety  
Monday, April 8, 2019 at 3:00 PM  
Room 643 of the Legislative Office Building**

**MINUTES**

The Senate Select Committee on Prison Safety met at 3:00 PM on April 8, 2019 in Room 643 of the Legislative Office Building. Senators Jim Burgin, Kathy Harrington, Ralph Hise, Tom McInnis, Floyd McKissick, Norm Sanderson and Joyce Waddell were present.

Senator Steinburg called the meeting to order and recognized Michael Caviness and Dwight Green.

Senator Steinburg then recognized Mr. Gary Mohr, current president of the American Correctional Association, and former Director of Rehabilitation and Corrections in Ohio.

Mr. Mohr began by stating that now was not the time to “tinker around the edges,” and that everyone involved has a great opportunity to make things better.

Mr. Mohr stated that the number of assaults on Correctional Staff decreased between 2017 and 2018 by 28% in North Carolina. He pointed out by saying that this not an outlier in the United States. He stated that problems were largely perceptions, but that any assault is one too many. He also stated that with the perception of higher assaults, it was equally possible to bring about real improvements.

In referencing an article in *Governing Magazine*, Mr. Mohr pointed out that there was an 11% increase in the number of available state jobs, but had a 24% decrease in applicants on a national basis from 2013-2017. Part of this was due to an inability of competing with pay scales in the private sector, and an overall negative public perception of public sector jobs. It was also reported that 33% of managers had insufficient tools to recruit. Mr. Mohr also pointed out there has been a drop in applications in law enforcement by 63%, also stating that’s where the Correctional Officers are categorized.

He also referenced the problem of the time to onboard new employees, citing California which has 179 to onboard a new employee. Because of reforms undertaken, that number dropped to 65 days. In North Carolina, it takes 100 days to onboard a new employee. Onboarding refers to the time it takes from an application to being filed to an employee being placed on the payroll.

Mr. Mohr pointed out that while there is a reported 18% vacancy rate, the occupational vacancy rate (factoring in absent correctional officers for a variety of reasons) is 21.82%. Mr. Mohr also reiterated that some prisons in North Carolina have an operations vacancy rate equal to or greater than 30%.

It was also pointed out that the largest groups of new hires as Correctional Officers are African-American females, and Caucasian females in that order.

Mr. Mohr praised the level of which the professionalism of the Correctional Officers has improved, pointing to the number of academy beds available, and the increase in basic training by two weeks. He stated that this was problematic since there are fewer annualized beds available for basic training.

He also stated that he applauded the state for implementing the STEP pay systems for such organizations as the Highway Patrol, and suggested Correctional Officers should be afforded such a scale since they deal with a much more violent group of people than any other profession.

Mr. Mohr also stated that changes in key performance indicators must be known in a timely manner, and dealt with in a timely manner, with the goal making the metrics better across the entire system. He pointed to former New York Commissioner Bill Bratton, who used key performance indicators to improve the New York City Police Department, and by extension the crime rate.

Mr. Mohr suggested using the Dan River Prison Farm as a model for potential improvement methods, using data to recommend a specific plan of action to address the violent acts by gang members. He stated that the Dan River Prison Farm began using certain incentives to give the inmates hope.

Mr. Mohr also stated the staff engagement needs to be improved, and an increase in seeking their input since they're the ones who see all the goings on at the prison.

Mr. Mohr's presentation also included a program called "Back to Basics One Stop Hiring," which can be found on the website.

Mr. Mohr also talked about the need for a STEP pay system for correctional officers. There are 29 of 30 systems with a known pay progression system, with a national starting average of \$33,538, and a finishing average of \$51,000.

He also stated that regular engagement with staff is far preferable to exit interviews, as the managers will be able to implement certain improvements as they frequently engage staff. He further stated that the command managers should do the engaging, as opposed to human resources staff who are not directly involved with the inmates on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Mohr also stated that he liked the ideas that have been heard on educational opportunities so that Correctional Officers have opportunities to sharpen their skill sets.

Senator Steinburg then opened the floor to questions from the committee.

Senator Hise started by asking Mr. Mohr what should expectations be for a Correctional Officer to stay in their job, given the statistics about career changes over a person's lifetime. Mr. Mohr responded by the need to look at incentives differently, starting with educational opportunities as well as promotional opportunities. He also pointed out the importance of time off, which is one of the biggest drivers to an increasing vacancy rate. Senator Hise followed up by asking about the idea of creating a system where the onboarding time is 60 days or less, asking why it would

not be possible to onboard a Correctional Officer within a couple days, letting basic training being the measuring stick for keeping Correctional Officer candidates. Mr. Mohr replied by stating there are certain things that need to be done in order to hire a Correctional Officer, such as background checks and physicals. But he did go on to say that getting to a sixty day onboarding process is possible and bring on quality people.

Senator Burgin asked Mr. Mohr who had the best prison system as compared with the rest of the country. Mr. Mohr indicated that there are five or six states that have received the Golden Eagle Award, citing Ohio, Texas, and the military prisons are among the best. Senator Burgin asked if most of the most awarded systems have career paths for the people that they hire. Mr. Mohr stated that those systems have a STEP system of some kind, and have a system of promotions. He also stated that all systems have a kind of paramilitary system. Senator Burgin asked if it would be possible to fast track outgoing members of the Armed Forces into Correctional Officer positions. Mr. Mohr stated that Ohio was actively courting the military and made hiring said military members a priority. Senator Burgin asked for the opinion of the 8 hour shift system versus the 12 hour shift system. Mr. Mohr stated a minority of systems work on a 12 hour system, explaining that it works to fill vacancies. The problem becomes when a prison has to use Correctional Officers beyond the 12 hours, depriving them of the needed time off.

Senator McInnis asked when results would be seen if all of the ideas discussed were implemented, and did Mr. Mohr have an idea of the cost. Mr. Mohr stated that with the efforts being made now, there will be a little bit of a turn, but it can't be sustained without a long term sense of hope in selling the positions to be filled. Part of the work is also in educating the public in what Correctional Officers do, and how well they serve the public. He also mentioned the need to implement Key Performance Indicators now. Senator McInnis followed up by pointing out the vacancy rates among the prisons across the state, stating his belief that there is a management problem in addition to all the other problems. Mr. Mohr stated that he believes that the biggest drivers is security level, and that close security has a higher vacancy rate due to the volume of incidents. He also stated Key Performance Indicators are an important factor for finding real information as to where the problems are. Senator McInnis asked Mr. Mohr what he thought was the ideal vacancy rate, to which Mr. Mohr replied that he did not believe that any prison could get below 4.5%

Senator McKissick asked about comparisons between North Carolina and Ohio. Mr. Mohr stated the Ohio has 14,000 more inmates in 27 prisons. Most systems have larger facilities than North Carolina. Furthermore, it would be ideal to keep inmates in smaller groups, stating his belief the larger prisons are less desirable for security reasons. Senator McKissick followed up by asking what the scope of his investigation on the North Carolina prison system. Mr. Mohr responded that his job was to take his findings and bring Back to Basics and staff development into focus, as an attempt to implement best practices. Senator McKissick asked how much time would take to implement Back to Basics. Mr. Mohr stated that it takes two days to ask staff what the problems are, to make recommendations, and to allow the Wardens to implement those recommendations, communicate them to the other facilities, so that they can implement best practices. Mr. Mohr stated that every system has policies that be tweaked, and that the big concern also being in compliance with such federal standards as the Prison Rape Elimination Act

of 2003, as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. He also stated that there have been surprise audits of prisons in the North Carolina prison system by outside groups.

Senator Peterson asked Mr. Mohr if North Carolina does a good job of recruiting Correctional Officers. Mr. Mohr stated that we are hampered by public perception, and the best recruitment tool is great staff. He also stated that there could be an idea of a referral bonus. Senator Peterson followed up by asking if Community Colleges have been engaged in training, while Mr. Mohr stated that there is some engagement.

Senator Sanderson asked what law enforcement would look like if you backed out Correctional Officers out of the statistics. Mr. Mohr stated that the difference would be significant due to the fact that the survey did not include local law enforcement.

Senator Waddell asked about housing for Correctional Officers being used as a recruiting tool. Mr. Mohr stated that could be a problem with the possibility of Correction Officers moving from one site to another, but did state that the idea of housing or housing assistance should be explored. Senator Waddell followed up by asking about the largest number of applicants being female, with Mr. Mohr does not have the data on what the separation data for female officers. Tracy Little, Deputy Secretary of Corrections, stated that 65% of Correctional Officers of male, but that the larger number of applicants are female. Senator Waddell asked about recruiting Correctional Officers in the high schools. Mr. Mohr stated recruiting in high schools could create liability issues, although there are systems who have “cadet” type of positions. Senator Waddell commented that the idea is look at salary increases as a first step.

Senator Peterson asked if there was a correlation between inmate health care and prison safety. Mr. Mohr stated that mental health care is a huge issue, which is why it is important to look at all factors in the prison system in a holistic fashion.

Senator Steinburg concluded the meeting by thanking Mr. Mohr for participating in the work of the committee.

The meeting adjourned at 4:28 p.m..

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Senator Bob Steinburg, Chair  
Presiding

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Edward Stiles, Committee Clerk